

Course Description

Semester in the Southwest

Features of this Course

- Wilderness First Aid Certification from Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS
- Backpacking, Caving, Rock Climbing, Canoeing and Independent Student Expedition
- Average Pack Weight: 50 pounds
- Group Size: 15 students / 3-5 instructors
- Minimum Age: 17
- Average Age: 20
- Elevations of 3,000–11,000 ft

The Expedition

This semester spent in the outdoors involves 88 days camping out, exploring the Southwest, developing skills, making friends, pushing yourself and having fun. National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) Semesters in the Southwest are divided into sections that will take you from the canyons of the Rio Grande to the Ponderosa Pine forests of the Gila Wilderness. You may find yourself jamming your hands and feet into granite cracks or crawling on your hands and knees through decorated limestone caves. You'll sleep out under the stars, watch the rain from under a tent fly and explore the ruins of prehistoric civilizations. You'll work hard hiking with a heavy pack in steep, rocky terrain, but you'll play hard, too. These semesters are action-packed learning adventures that leave you with the skills and experience necessary to travel in the wilderness long after the end of your course.

The semester is comprised of five different sections, in addition to a Wilderness First Aid (WFA) course. These sections, which last from two to three weeks, include backpacking, rock climbing, caving, canoeing and a backpacking student expedition. Between each section, the course will either pass through NOLS Southwest's facility or stop at a campground in Texas, Arizona or New Mexico. Each semester section will end with student evaluations.

Wilderness First Aid Section

The semester curriculum features a WFA course that focuses on first aid training specifically applicable to wilderness situations. Staff from the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS will teach this course. Fast-paced and hands-on, this 2½-day course covers a wide range of wilderness medicine topics for people who travel and work in the outdoors. This course is pre-approved by such organizations as the American Camping Association, the US Forest Service, the US Coast Guard and other governmental agencies. Those with previous wilderness medicine training may also use this WFA course for recertification. We recertify current cards from the following organizations only: WMI of NOLS, SOLO and WMA.

Backpacking Section

Your first hiking section is an exciting adventure spent exploring the Gila Wilderness, the first federally designated wilderness area in the United States. During this section, you'll practice outdoor living skills, wilderness travel techniques, minimum-impact camping, leadership and teamwork. As the section progresses, longer hiking days, off-trail travel and navigation and experimenting with the opportunity to lead your peers will challenge you. These challenges become rewarding as you learn the art of living comfortably in the wilderness. When you are not hiking, you'll spend time learning about the natural world, human history, astronomy, or backcountry baking. If you are lucky, perhaps you'll hear the bugle of an elk in the distance before going to bed.

You'll be travelling anywhere between 5,000 to 10,900 feet in elevation, and passing through a variety of different ecosystems along the way. Water can be scarce and it may be necessary to carry it from camp to camp. A rugged land of deep canyons surrounded by high alpine plateaus, the Gila is home to an unusual diversity of plants and animals that range from desert-adapted species to those more commonly found in northern latitudes. More recently, Mexican Grey Wolves have been reintroduced into the Gila. The human history of the Gila dates back thousands of years to the time when it was the home of the Mogollon civilization. Evidence of these prehistoric cultures can be found while traveling through the area. The Gila also served as a refuge for Geronimo and his band of Apaches.



Rock Climbing Section

You'll spend a little over two weeks climbing the granite domes of Cochise's Stronghold in Arizona's Dragoon Mountains. The hidden nooks of this rock fortress contain remnants from the Chiricahua Apache who once lived in this region. The area was named for the famed Chief Cochise who inhabited this area over 100 years ago. This beautiful remote climbing area provides excellent opportunity to cover a comprehensive climbing curriculum. The focus of the climbing section is to develop responsible, competent and confident climbers. You'll concentrate on a series of skills that begins with basic risk management, movement on rock, rope handling, and knot tying. The curriculum then progresses to belaying, top roping, rappelling, anchors, and protection placement. Each student has the opportunity to learn at his or her own speed. Your instructors will emphasize developing a responsible, positive attitude toward climbing that will help you build upon your own natural abilities. If you are ready there may be opportunities to do a multi-pitch climb and/or practice lead climbing. NOLS has set standards by which we evaluate each student's readiness and ability before allowing them to lead climb.

Canoe Expedition Section

The towering canyon walls of the Rio Grande River provide your introduction to canoeing skills and river travel. Traveling the river in canoes will give you an opportunity to experience wilderness travel on water. The river section launches from Big Bend National Park and the take-out is more than 100 miles and two weeks downstream. This section of the Rio Grande flows in a gradual progression from flat water to occasional class II or III rapids. Depending on student abilities, some of these rapids will be run in canoes, while the more difficult stretches will be portaged. Portaging around rapids is a normal and useful canoeing skill. You should expect the vast majority of travel to be on flat water along this winding desert river.

This Chihuahua desert region is rich in both human and natural history. Land-based explorations of side canyons and the Chihuahua desert are integral elements of this section. Classes will include water risk management, river dynamics, scouting and river rescue. There may be potential for a "solo," discussed below, on this section.

Caving Section

Caving takes you into a remarkable underground world. Surreal formations, mysterious passages and a delicate ecosystem define this three-dimensional landscape known to few. The caving section is approximately two weeks long, during which time you will explore southern Arizona's extensive cave systems. The curriculum during this section includes underground movement, technical travel skills, cave geology and biology, cave conservation and management concerns, and hazard evaluation. Depending on location and time considerations, courses may also be exposed to cave photography or cave survey and inventory. There may also be an opportunity to participate in a service project for a federal land agency. This section is a fast paced and exciting learning experience.

Independent Student Expedition in the Galiuros Wilderness

The final section of your southwest semester will be focused on executing your own student-led expedition. Before heading into the field, your semester group will have the opportunity to plan your hiking rations, gear and route with a focus on lightweight backpacking. This component is unique to southwest semesters and allows you to put to use all of the skills you have learned on during the course. Student expeditions will last anywhere from 3–7 days and your instructors may be up to 24 hours away from the student groups. You'll hike through one of the many mountain ranges called sky islands, a name that comes from the fact that these ranges are isolated pockets of alpine vegetation and lush forests surrounded by barren desert basins. Here you'll hike through ponderosa pine, oak and manzanita while looking out over the stark desert below.

Course Format

The transitions between sections are kept as short as possible to allow us to maximize our time in the wilderness. The bulk of your time in-town will be spent reorganizing gear, meeting new instructors and doing personal laundry or other errands. This is the time when mail is received, telephones are accessible and you may even bask in a little free time.

Different instructors work each section in order to provide the most qualified staff for a particular skill area. One instructor, a course proctor, may remain with the group for the entire semester. This instructor is the key liaison between you and the NOLS community and will provide consistency between sections.

While you are in the field, you'll live with two or three other students in a "cook group." These small groups help disperse the impact on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living. You'll also travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially, these groups will include an instructor, but later in your course—once you know the intricacies of map-reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation—students often travel in small groups on their own. NOLS is a school and in addition to the practical experiential learning activities there will be formal sit-down classes presented during the day or



in the evening.

NOLS Southwest reserves the right to make changes to course area locations due to unforeseen circumstances such as forest fires, permit restrictions and/or other unusual circumstances.

Student Independence

On all NOLS courses, students will be independent (unaccompanied by instructors) at various times. This will include time in and around camp such as while cooking or performing camp chores. Instructors may allow students to travel away from camp. Students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after the field portions of their course.

Independent Student Group Travel

An emphasis of this course is the development of skills that permit you to be self-sufficient in remote backcountry areas. Our teaching progression for accomplishing this is carefully planned and executed. Initially, travel groups, usually of four to six students, will include an instructor who will teach travel skills and leadership. Gradually, as you gain proficiency, the instructors will allow you to take on more responsibility and make more of the decisions. When you have demonstrated the necessary competency to the instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you travel from camp to camp. We call this “daily independent student travel” and it is an effective educational tool. It allows you to practice travel skills and leadership and gives you responsibility for the outcome while still having indirect supervision by instructors and the benefit of the NOLS support systems.

This course may culminate in a Student Expedition. After successful practice with daily independent student travel and if your instructors think your group is ready, the instructors will help you divide into student expedition groups (usually four to six students each). With instructor oversight, each group will then select a leader and carefully plan and execute a multi-day independent student-led expedition. This part of the course builds on the skills you’ve learned and practiced and allows you to travel without instructors for several days. Students are aware of where the instructors and the other student groups are planning to travel and camp. However, instructors with emergency communication capability may be up to 24 hours away from the students. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

Solos

On this course you may have an opportunity to do a “solo” when you spend a day and night alone. There is no hiking during the solo. Many students find this experience a good way to reflect on the course and immerse themselves in the environment.

Weather

The Southwest can be host to extremes in temperature and weather conditions. **Though warm, mild weather is typical, students should expect anything from monsoon rains and extreme heat, to snow, wind and subfreezing temperatures.** During the months of November and December subfreezing temperatures are common, especially at night. Sometimes these weather changes occur in a matter of minutes; at other times storms or cold temperatures can last for days. There will be times when you are cold, wet and tired, but you’ll learn to manage these situations—you might even find yourself smiling while you do. In time, your personal adaptation to varied conditions will help you understand and appreciate the remarkable flora and fauna that make the Southwest such a special environment.

Physical Challenge and Fitness

Please read the page in your enrollment packet on physical conditioning. Physical challenge is not necessarily a goal for a NOLS course, but they are physically demanding. Each section of your NOLS course will offer different levels and types of physical challenge. Physical challenges of the semester include backpacking both on and off trail in steep, rugged terrain. All Gila hiking routes include numerous river crossings that are done by wading through ankle to waist deep moving water. Rock climbing is taught on vertical cliffs and the approaches are often over steep rocky terrain. Some of the caving is vertical in nature, requiring the use of ropes and technical equipment to descend and ascend in and out of the caves. Some caves are muddy and the footing may be slippery. In all the areas traveled during the semester, numerous species of sharp spiny plants are common. Rattlesnakes and scorpions are some of the potentially harmful animals that students will learn to recognize and avoid.

Identifying and managing the hazards of moving water, falling and rolling rocks, weather, animals and steep terrain will be a constant theme in our instruction. The consistent practice of risk management techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition in these wild, beautiful mountains and wilderness areas healthy and enjoyable.



The semester is long—nearly three months. One challenge which is difficult to explain, but is perhaps the most important to the experience, is that of living, working and learning with the same people day-in and day-out. You'll become very close to your fellow expedition members and perhaps some long lasting friendships will be formed. Expedition behavior, the ability to get along with the other members of the group and function as a team, is a vital component of the NOLS curriculum and the semester experience. This aspect of the course will be a continuing theme throughout the semester.

Course Objectives

Each semester is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Working with these variables, it is our intent to see each student accomplish the following outcomes:

Leadership and Teamwork

Students are exposed to the theory and practice of outdoor leadership, teamwork and expedition behavior. At NOLS, expedition behavior involves commitment to the group, acceptance of others and cooperation to achieve goals. Each student is expected to:

- Influence the group in a positive way and support a positive learning environment.
- Work effectively as a member of a team.
- Communicate clearly, actively listen and state personal opinions with clarity.
- Accurately identify personal strengths, skills and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership styles.
- Take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals.
- Appropriately manage conflict.
- Use abilities and initiative in a leadership role with peers.
- Use situationally appropriate decision making skills.

Outdoor Skills

NOLS students learn to live and travel in the wilderness within a framework of personal well-being and care of the environment. Each student is expected to:

- Live comfortably in mountain, desert and river environments, including the ability to camp, cook and dress for varied conditions with minimum impact.
- Travel competently in mountainous, desert or river terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, backpacking, paddling and river-crossing techniques.
- Experience basic rock climbing, caving, and canoe techniques.
- Demonstrate ability to be organized and efficient with gear.
- Consistently arrive prepared for daily events.
- Demonstrate responsible use and care of personal and group equipment.

Environmental Studies

An integral part of every NOLS course is to raise students' awareness of their impact on the natural world. Each student is expected to:

- Practice sound Leave No Trace camping skills.
- Use basic observation and interpretive skills to demonstrate an understanding and respect for the natural world.
- Understand the history, facts and potential solutions to relevant environmental issues.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local and ancient southwest cultures.
- Understand basic organization and responsibilities of land management agencies.

Risk Management and Decision-Making

NOLS teaches wilderness visitors to practice responsible habits that promote the health and well-being of self and others. Each student is expected to:

- Demonstrate a developing knowledge of the hazards in mountain, desert, river and underground environments.
- Recognize and minimize risk to self and others.
- Understand emergency procedures for the environment.
- Demonstrate competent first aid skills.
- Use developing experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion.

As a result of this course, we expect our students to be competent and responsible wilderness travelers and leaders.

